



# An Insight into the Educational Needs of Deaf High School Students

## Interviews with school staff and students

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides an insight into the educational needs, experiences and school support for deaf<sup>1</sup> high school students attending a mainstream school, from the perspectives of the deaf students themselves, their teachers and support staff. Themes emerged from interviews with the students and staff around learning, communication, school culture and social interactions. The gathered information highlighted that the deaf students' ability to communicate directly with the school staff and their peer group formed a central part of their educational experience. This article also provides an insight into the practical strategies perceived as effective by the students and staff, which were discussed and highlighted to ensure an overall visual approach can be employed when working with deaf students.

### Research

#### Keywords

*Deaf education, inclusive schools, communication, social interaction, school culture, secondary school students.*

### BACKGROUND

Listening to students' voices can provide educators with powerful insights into their own experiences and it can highlight that students can and should be involved in planning their own education (Iantaffi, Jarvis & Sinka, 2003; Royal National Institute for the Deaf, 2002). This current research project was based on a study in the United Kingdom which looked at deaf students' personal experiences of attending mainstream schools, including the perspectives of the deaf students themselves and the perspectives of hearing students who had deaf students in their classes (Royal National Institute for the Deaf, 2002). The practical strategies which emerged from this UK study demonstrated that students themselves are a key source of information in relation to "successful inclusion" in a mainstream school, whilst also highlighting the importance of involving students in the monitoring of the educational successes for deaf students within the school system.

Listening to the voices of students and staff to gain their "insider" perspectives in relation to the education of deaf students can provide us with a wealth of practical information, which can be brought together with the wider

school system in order to help support a positive learning environment. Within a mainstream classroom, the teacher-based instruction and learning tasks are established on the assumed knowledge and communication experiences of hearing students (McKee & Biederman, 2003). Therefore, insight into the adaptations and accommodations that can support deaf students' educational needs within a mainstream classroom can be highly beneficial for staff working with deaf students and for the deaf students themselves.

*The New Zealand Sign Language Act* (2006) recognises New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) as an official language of New Zealand and gives it equal status to that of spoken language. The recent launch of *New Zealand Sign Language in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) may extend opportunities to hearing students to learn NZSL, to learn about Deaf culture, and to also interact with other users of the language and enhance participation in education by those whose first language is NZSL (Ministry of Education, 2006). This current research project was timely due to this recent advancement towards supporting an inclusive New Zealand society and education system.

### THE PROJECT

Staff and students involved in the education of deaf students at a local college were interviewed to examine the educational experiences, needs and school support for deaf students at the college. The local college has a total roll of 924 students (Education Review Office, 2006). The Deaf Resource Class, which is situated within the Learning Support Centre at the college, had a roll of six deaf students at the time of the research project, who attended classes within the Deaf Resource Class and in the mainstream. This project was undertaken in 2007 as part of the postgraduate Diploma in Educational Psychology. The objectives of this project were to document the experiences and perspectives of the deaf students, teachers and support staff at this college with regards to the educational needs of deaf students, and to identify any themes that emerged from the interviews.

### Participants

The participants consisted of five deaf students ranging from 13 to 18 years of age attending an urban secondary school, two teachers of the deaf who work in the Deaf Resource Class

<sup>1</sup> In this article the lower-case form "deaf" is used to refer to the deaf participants including those who share a language (New Zealand Sign Language) and cultural values that are distinct from the hearing society, and those who may not use New Zealand Sign Language fluently but may still have culturally- and linguistically- diverse experiences. Uppercase "Deaf" is used in referring to the Deaf community and Deaf culture.

at the school, two support staff (teacher aide/communicators) who work with the deaf students in the Deaf Resource Class and out in mainstream classes, and two teachers who work with deaf students in mainstream classes.

Three out of the five deaf students identified as being “Deaf”, in relation to their hearing loss, whilst also adding that they have a degree of hearing or speech. For example:

- “Deaf, I can do both speak and sign.”
- “Deaf, that’s it. Sometimes I can hear a loud bang.”
- “Deaf, with a little hearing.”

One student identified as being “Half deaf, just a normal thing”. One student identified as being “Half deaf and half hearing, because sometimes at night time I can hear noises.”

Four out of the six staff members described themselves as being “Hearing”. One staff member identified as being “halfway between Hearing Impaired and Deaf”, and one staff member identified as being “born Deaf ... I am full Deaf and I use Sign Language.”

### Methodology

The project used semi-structured interview methodology where the data was collected through one-to-one interviews with the participants. The advantages of using a semi-structured interview, which is informal but guided, allows natural conversation to flow, freedom for the interviewee to explore thought, and flexibility of the interviewer in selecting aspects to follow up on (Coolican, 1999). The interviews were conducted using the participants’ preferred mode of communication (for example, spoken English, NZSL). Four out of the five interviews with the student participants were conducted using NZSL by the participant and the researcher, and one interview was conducted with the participant and researcher using spoken English supported with visual communication strategies (for example, key signs, gestures). The interviews with the staff participants consisted of one interview being conducted using NZSL, one being conducted using spoken English supported with visual communication strategies and four interviews being conducted using spoken English.

Informed consent was gained from the participants which included the interviews conducted using NZSL to be video-taped for transcribing purposes, the opportunity for the participants to review notes taken during the interviews and the generalisation of the participants’ views according to the themes that emerge, so that no participants were identified.

By capturing the voices of the deaf students and the staff that work closely with them, it was expected that an insight would be provided into the educational experiences of the deaf students attending various classes throughout the school. The research carried out by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (2002) formed the foundation for the themes that this research project was based on; the aligned themes that emerged from the interviews illustrating the educational experiences of deaf students at the college.

### THEMES

- Learning
- Adapting modes of communication
- School culture
- Social interactions

### LEARNING

#### Support Staff

Support staff are seen as central to the deaf students’ learning at the college. Four out of five students reported that the support staff explain the learning material and content clearly to them, which was perceived as vital, especially in the mainstream classes. Providing in-class support was perceived by the deaf students as helping them understand the work and providing them with assistance if they are having difficulties. The support staff’s ability to be a good signer, to interpret the learning material into NZSL in the mainstream classes and to communicate the learning material in a variety of visual methods was also reflected in the students’ responses. One student said: “They write things down, draw diagrams, give examples and show different ways of doing things.” Interestingly, three out of five students commented that there were no unhelpful aspects of what the support staff can do in relation to supporting their learning. Potential barriers to learning, in relation to support staff, were when students believe that the support staff are too busy to provide assistance at times when working with more than one student, or if the support staff’s level of signed communication was inferior to the signing deaf student’s. Comments from the staff also support the view that clarifying and explaining as much information as possible, noting down the learning material and providing feedback to the classroom teacher and teachers of the deaf that reflect any areas of difficulty the deaf student may be facing, are helpful strategies for support staff to employ to support the deaf students’ learning. Unhelpful learning-supports that support staff can do were reflected by the teaching staff as including the support staff not communicating enough of the lesson content for the signing deaf students, answering questions out loud in class and creating a sense of dependence between the deaf student and the support staff member.

#### Direct Communication

Direct communication between deaf students and teaching staff was identified as important to the deaf students’ positive learning experience. The supports that the deaf students perceived as the teacher communicating directly with them included:

- “If the teacher does some signs, a little bit of signing, like “tree”, “rain” etc, that helps me.”
- “Teachers can write things down, when explaining things to me.”
- Using pointing and gestures when there is no teacher aide present.

Strategies for communicating directly with deaf students in class were perceived by the teaching and support staff to include using more of a visual approach and to “chat” with the deaf student occasionally, instead of only communicating via the support staff. A member of the support staff suggested: “... it would be quite nice if [the teachers] actually knew the sign names of the students just to make it a bit more personal.”

Staff and students spoke of barriers to communication between deaf students and mainstream teachers. When mainstream teachers did not communicate directly to students this could be viewed by the students as teachers not understanding their needs:

“Some teachers just leave me and some teachers don’t know about me – they don’t talk to me, or help me.”

“I go up to the teacher if I want to ask a question about the work. I go up and say “hi,” and then ask the question. Teachers don’t come up to me.”

However, certain mainstream teachers were identified as initiating communication with deaf students by using eye contact, simple gestures and also disciplining the deaf student when they misbehave: “Whether it be to discuss something, to point something out or, you know, to treat them like any other kid.”

### **Effective strategies to accommodate the deaf students’ learning needs**

The students reported many ways in which mainstream teachers supported them during lessons. These support strategies could be perceived as simple but clearly effective and were seen by the deaf students as worth reporting:

- not talking for too long
- electronic access to the course material and online discussions with the subject teacher
- using practical activities in the classroom
- “write on the whiteboard and I can copy it down.”

These strategies suggested that the teachers need to be aware of the deaf students’ educational needs and to adopt appropriate strategies in the classroom. It is interesting that the majority of these strategies could also be seen as important for all of the students in the class. The staff members also reported supportive learning strategies for the deaf students, which included the use of visual resources and ensuring that the speaker’s face is visible for lip-reading.

Examples of the supports that are in place within the Deaf Resource Class, which the deaf students perceived as beneficial to their learning, included it being easy to request help, having the support staff and teachers of the deaf present and being able to communicate with fellow classmates about the class work.

### **ADAPTING MODES OF COMMUNICATION**

Most of the students agreed that being able to communicate with other deaf students and staff in the Deaf Resource Class had some distinct advantages, such as ease of

communication, not feeling isolated and a shared understanding. These feelings are illustrated in the following quote: “deaf and deaf is the same as two hearing people talking to each other.” The majority of the students commented on altering their methods of communication with their hearing peers, which included writing things down, using the support staff to interpret, or using a few key signs: “there is a deaf way and a hearing way, which is different ... It’s like a “hearing” road and a “deaf” road and I go down the middle changing from road to road.”

Communication during group work in mainstream classes was acknowledged as being fairly limited, for example the deaf students reported on:

“Miscommunication. It’s hard. I stay back and don’t understand.”

“I will sit near the teacher aide. I never communicate with the hearing students, only the teacher aide.”

The staff identified the deaf students as also being isolated when involved in group work with other hearing students, adapting their communication modes to go via the support staff or using pen and paper. However, communication and social skills shared by both the hearing and deaf students were recognised by the majority of staff members as being an influential factor for communicating with their hearing peers:

“[X] has less difficulties with that because some students know some signing, and she is more socially adept at fitting in.”

“I think it depends on the relationship between the two teenagers and their communication skills ... and if the deaf student can understand, read lips, or if the hearing student can sign.”

The mainstream staff at the college perceived the communication between the deaf students and the staff in the Deaf Resource Class as the “model communication” for deaf students in the rest of the school. Communication is not alleged to be perfect within the Deaf Resource Class; however the communication tends to be free-flowing with shared understandings. Due to the ease of communication and the close knit community created within the Deaf Resource Class, some issues were identified with students crossing the boundaries that are apparent between a staff member and a student.

### **SCHOOL CULTURE**

Having other deaf students at the college was viewed by the deaf students as a positive part of the school culture, by raising the deaf students’ sense of well-being as well as increasing the level of awareness amongst the hearing students and staff:

“I like it because we’re the same, we have grown up together, known each other for a long time and we like the same sports – we have a good relationship.”

“It’s good. A nice family here. It’s like a family and good friends.”

When discussing the positive aspects of having other deaf students at the college, a couple of the students also commented on liking the presence of the hearing students at the college as well.

The hearing students learning Sign Language was perceived as a significant factor for raising the deaf awareness in the school. This was identified across the responses from the students and staff. The students perceived themselves as raising the deaf awareness in the school by teaching hearing students from their mainstream classes some NZSL: "I teach Sign Language, that's good. I teach three other students from my mainstream class." The NZSL classes held some lunchtimes in the Deaf Resource Class, meeting other deaf people, and seeing the support staff interpret information in class were identified as being examples of raising deaf awareness:

"It's amazing how many people ask you things – "how do I sign this?" or "how do I say that?", which is good. And also some of the teachers ... [Teacher] now signs "thank you" and it's quite nice."

### SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

The deaf students reported that they could communicate more easily with their deaf peers and felt that they were the peers who understood their needs and situation. The deaf students stated that the social interactions with their hearing peers involved talking "in little bits", with few opportunities for in-depth conversation. For example, they often talked about "rude things, because [the hearing students] understand the rude signs." The deaf students identified things that they cannot discuss with their hearing peers as:

- "All things. With hearing peers it's like using baby sign. [I can't talk about] what happened in the weekend, fun things, going to parties etc."
- "The Deaf community."
- "Sometimes people don't understand the communication and I have to find someone who can understand."
- "Sometimes signing is hard and different so I write stuff down."

The staff members identified communication as being an immense barrier for deaf students' social inclusion. Social interactions between the deaf students and their hearing classmates were identified as being dependent on the individual's personality, however the support staff acknowledged that they are used a lot of the time to communicate between the deaf and hearing students: "Well, they look at me really; they just turn to me and start talking so that I have to sign to the [deaf] students."

Some students identified that the majority of the deaf students live far away from school and have little or no social interactions with students out of school times: "I don't socialise with other people from school." A couple of students identified social interactions after school occurring on the bus, or through attending a party at their friend's place.

### SUMMARY

Deaf students' ability to communicate with staff members and their peer group at the college appear to form a central part of their educational experience. The practical strategies currently used in some classes were perceived as effective by the students and staff. Ensuring that more of a visual approach is employed, acknowledging the deaf students' mode of communication and supporting their access to the classroom lessons will continue to support a positive educational experience for students at the college. The findings indicated that teachers acknowledging that the student is deaf and being "deaf aware" are viewed as crucial to the deaf students' learning and positive school experience.

Deaf students being able to communicate effectively with other deaf and hearing students at school was also viewed as enhancing the educational and social experiences of deaf students. Hearing people who have knowledge of some Sign Language and visual communication strategies, having other deaf students at school and having a Deaf Resource Class are significant factors to support communication. It was apparent that the deaf students felt a sense of belonging in the school due to these factors and they perceived school as an enjoyable place to be.

Relationships depend upon good communication and therefore for deaf students there are likely to be issues with this area (Royal National Institute of the Deaf, 2002). A statement by a deaf student at the college, "... because we talk lots, that makes a good relationship" is reflective of the perception that communication is central to social interactions and building relationships. This can also be seen in relation to the communication between the deaf students and the mainstream teachers. It was identified that the limited communication between some of the deaf students and the mainstream teachers impacted on the quality of their relationships and the students' feelings of being acknowledged.

Four out of the five deaf students identified strategies they use to help them to interact with their hearing peers, such as writing things down, or teaching their peers some key signs. The majority of these strategies were consistent with the effective teaching strategies mainstream teachers can use to support their learning. Practical strategies used consistently by mainstream teachers can enable deaf students to access lessons more effectively (Jarvis, 2003). The practical strategies identified in this project could be perceived as straightforward and simple, but were considered as effective by the students and staff and therefore are important to report on.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research in this area may include a focus on the specific practical strategies perceived as effective by the students and staff, with the objective of developing a practical guide for educators. A guide for educators around adapting and accommodating the deaf students' educational needs would be highly beneficial in order to further support positive classroom relationships between deaf students, their teachers and peers, whilst also supporting access to the curriculum. Extending the project

to all deaf students who attend mainstream classes throughout New Zealand and the supports that will encourage them all to have a positive educational experience is a further area for study within the New Zealand context.

In summary, for education to be successful for deaf students, the learning environment and curriculum is required to be genuinely reflective of, and responsive to, a student's specific cultural background (Leigh, as cited in Beattie, 2001). As with many students, positive relationships are developed with some teachers better than others. However, in the case of deaf students, this seems to be based on whether or not teachers use strategies in the classroom which support interactions with the deaf students and allow the deaf students to access the lessons (Royal National Institute of the Deaf, 2002). This was a predominant feature for the deaf students in the current research project, where acknowledgement that the student is deaf and being "deaf aware" is viewed as crucial to the deaf students' learning and positive school experience.

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## AUTHOR PROFILE

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Tracey Esera works for the Ministry of Education, Special Education as an Educational Psychologist. Tracey has an interest in the education of deaf students in New Zealand due to her bilingual-bicultural background. Tracey is a hearing coda (Child of Deaf Adults) and is a fluent user of NZSL. She was raised amongst Deaf family members who share culturally and linguistically diverse experiences within the Deaf community and has spent time working in Deaf education.

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